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ABSTRACT

Described is a motivational group counseling program involving adolescent high-school students (14 to 16 years old) who were referred because of severe learning problems, including behavior problems and low self-esteem and motivation. Included are individual case studies and a group analysis. (IM)

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INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO MOTIVATION VIA THE ACTIVITY GROUP PROCESS

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In introducing the group experience described herein, it is necessary to provide not only an explanation of the group setting, but the group membership as well. The group was formed in an independent agency which provides remedial educational programs for children through adolescence. The children being helped are those who are experiencing learning problems which are reflected in poor grades, unacceptable behavioral patterns, low self-esteem, low motivation or some combination of these characteristics. These children usually do not adapt to the social norms of their peer group. They have been referred to the agency from local school systems, by other professionals, and through families who have had prior experience with the agency.

The agency director has promoted the premise that high self-esteem is as necessary for success in the academic world as it is in other facets of life. Through educational testing and diagnosis, school readiness evaluations, and other diagnostic procedures, the child is evaluated with remedial programs being recommended and instituted where necessary. Tutoring, one-on-one counseling, small motivational groups, parent counseling, and teacher and child workshops are all available as the need dictates.

The small motivational groups are open-ended groups which are felt to be most beneficial because of their relevance to the family situation. Normally a group is comprised of six children with eight being the upper limit. Two leaders are assigned except in cases of smaller groups which may be dealing more specifically with a particular learning disability or problem. In a changing group structure, it is essential for the leaders to be able to maintain motivation in the group. Because most of the

children have had no previous group experience, a concentration on group dynamics is also mandatory. One of the most important aspects of this group motivation is for the leaders to know the history of each child involved so that they have an insight into each child's needs. One of the primary goals of motivation is helping the individual to develop a self acceptance which will faciliate his group acceptance and the group's acceptance of him.

Coping with a diversified environment calls for certain ego functions in which children experiencing learning difficulties are often deficient. Built-in controls against over-stimulation, for the maintenance of ego boundaries, and for the ability to shift rapidly from one social grouping to another are necessary for emotional stability and positive self-esteem. Over-stimulation might be displayed in an emotional reaction of hostility to being hastled by a teacher or law officer. It might also be reflected in over-zealous joy in the fact of one of these individuals being put down. The lack of ego boundary maintenance might become apparent in the loss of self-control while being confronted in the group. It might be reflected in the use of vulgarity, being over-defensive, or in denial in the face of confrontation. The inability to shift rapidly from one social grouping to another is apparent in the descriptions of restrictive peer relationships. Group activities are promoted in each session, not aimed primarily at the expression of feelings, but rather to help the members to contain and organize their feelings and sensations, to anticipate possible frustrations, and to develop coping mechanisms in their everyday environment. That is to say, to help the members build the strong

egos necessary for development of the healthy ego functions enumerated above. Hopefully the shift will gradually be made from a largely concrete experience of their environment to more abstract forms of cognition, thinking and planning. By relating to the children, and in turn their relating to the leaders and each other, the group activities build confidence followed by competence which then leads to risk taking which starts the process all over again giving additional reinforcement. The individual becomes inwardly confident that he can attempt group interaction or individual performance without being subjected to censure or ridicule. In attempting an activity even a small amount of success which is given positive reinforcement will provide a feeling of competence which then will lead to additional risk taking and continued ego growth.

Because the individuals being helped are in fact individuals and not merely "group members," it is this writer's opinion that the leaders must be capable of an eclectic approach. It is conceded that much of the work being accomplished in the group is in fact behavioral in nature. The use of two counselors or leaders, preferably one of each sex, has advantages in this setting, particularly with the critical adolescence ages where role experimentation comes to the fore. Having the stern discipline of one leader complimented by the sanctuary of the understanding of the other gives impetus to the development of confidence, competence and courage. These leadership roles are not exclusive to the leaders, but are interchangable, dependent upon the situation at the moment. Although the functional approach to leadership is attempted in order to build and improve the leadership skills of the group, the leaders themselves follow the leadership style theory and utilize the democratic style pre-

dominanantly. In an evaluation of these leaders in accordance with Irving Yalom's hierarchy of leadership style, they more closely fit the format of the provider.

The period of adolescence can seem outwardly to be unconstructive, and additionally, difficult with which to contend. However, it is a period in which some level of respectability is established and in which the break from parental domination begins. This breaking process often creates family problems because the parents do not understand the dynamics of this age range developmentally. In order for the break to progress, there is the need for conflict between the child and the parent. Since this need often is not being met (and/or not properly handled) in the home, confrontation in the group can become very relevant and imperative with both leaders and members confronting and being confronted. The specific group process will be developed later in this paper. However, in neither instance is it the writer's intent to define the multitude of attitudes and problems encountered in these group sessions. It is important here only to note further that activity produces sentiment which develops the norms which govern the behavior and development of the group. The group leaders can and do manipulate this activity and the ensuing sentiment.

Group Composition

The group defined herein was in progress at the time the writer was accepted as a group faciliator. Sesions are held once a week for one hour in the agency offices. The group originally consisted of five male high school students ranging in age from 14 to 16 years. Acceptance into the group was based on low grades in school caused by

either a lack of motivation and/or unacceptable behavioral patterns. By contract, the student is free to leave the group when a "B" average has been attained in any given school semester. Because of the individuals involved and the seriousness of their respective problems, the leaders in this group were both experienced men who have worked together over a period of time. A brief resume of the students' background follows:

S.S. is 16 years of age and mentally retarded. He functions on an educable level with good potential for employment and attainment of social skills. With development of these skills, he should be able to function fairly independently. S.S. has an older brother on whom he depended heavily for support. On seeing this brother succumb to a nervous and emotional disruption, S.S. was placed in the group to revitalize and rebuild his social skills.

B.H. is 16 years of age and a junior in high school. He has one older sister who is married and living out of the country. His parents are living separately with his father located out of town. Although B.H. is important to, and loved by both parents, he has been highly over-indulged with minimal effective discipline being administered. He is extremely well read for his age and has a high potential for academic success. Unfortunately this individual, as a bid for recognition, displays a bizarre almost sociopathic image. He had withdrawn from "normal" peer relationships and displayed total lack of motivation in his school work. B.H. had associated with a local motorcycle gang and identified with a "Nazi" image. He built a lucrative business dealing in German flags, emblems, etc. At one point about two years ago, he flirted with self-destruction and succeeded only in permanently

scaring his face with pock marks of black powder. B.H. has experimented with both drugs and alcohol.

S.U. is 15 years of age and the youngest of three brothers. Both parents are well educated and working in professional capacities. The family comes from the middle class, seemingly having all the advantages of this economic level. S.U. was totally unmotivated and involved with that segment of his peer group referred to as the "freaks." He has experienced drugs and alcohol and relies heavily on both as a means of coping. Although the family appears concerned and is willing to support remediation and professional assistance, this support comes through as being primarily monetary. S.U. was placed in the group with the hope that some meaningful relationships could be developed which would at least start S.U. up the long road to self acceptance.

J.Z. is 16 years of age and a junior in high school J.Z. and an older sister were both adopted by parents from the upper middle class. There is some evidence of minimal over-indulgence. However, more importantly, there is a strong personality clash between J.Z. and his sister which results in a constant effort on the part of this sister to defame her brother. This individual is fairly "straight" but with minimal motivation in his academic efforts. As his self-acceptance grew, J.Z. became not only a model in the group but also important to group maintenance. His abilities as a peer facilitator were most noteworthy.

S.R. is the youngest in the group and 14 years of age and a sophomore in high school. He comes from the upper middle class and both of his parents are also professional people. He is an only child, large for his age and more mature in some ways than his peers. He also was over-indulged minimally, but his major difficulty with self-image

more likely was a result of over-expectation on the part of people with whom he had to relate, both in the family and in his school setting. S.R. is intelligent, athletic, but unmotivated in the academic sphere. He also contributed to the group maintenance as an active listener and communication helper. He usually could be counted on to say it straight.

Group Process:

The group structure basically is that of a counseling group although it does at times take on the characteristic of a personal growth group. Being open-ended the group process does not conform to the normal four stage development defined by Bruce W. Tuckman. The elements of these four stages occured at various times in the group but not necessarily sequentially. As new members entered the group, an independent, subtle stage of testing and dependence occurred, followed by conflict. As the new individual became accepted, and in turn learned to trust the other members of the group, he blended into the cohesiveness of the group. At this point the group began dealing with the new problems which were presented to the group by the new member.

Each time the group met the process was repetitive and generally followed the model set fourth in "The Human Group" by George C. Homans (1950). The sessions normally opened with a round-robin inquiry into the activities of the members during the preceding week. If any member had a problem or a particular point of interest or need about which he wanted group feedback or reaction, it was acted upon by the group. Ocasionally these interactions became important therapeutic

encounters which were allowed to run the entire session. The model set forth by Homans is one of activity which generates interaction which produces sentiment out of which norms evolve. After the initial round-robin, a group activity which had been previously planned by the leaders was begun. This activity might simply be a team competition involving balloon volleyball or Chinese football. On occasion games requiring independent skills in the affective as well as the cognitive areas were played utilizing team effort as well as individual participation. In either event, the leaders joined in as a part of the group except on those occasions when a game director or referee was needed. Charades, art charades, anagrams, facts and five, the dictionary game and others were used to stimulate intellectual and emotional involvement as well as competitive interest.

This involvement and interest gave reinforcement to the fact that in his own way each member had abilities in some areas and even though he might lack ability in another area, that was okay. The lack of motor coordination in some members became quite evident in some of these activities. The ability of various methods of self-expression was pointed out by the leaders (vis-a-vis charades, art charades word games and definitions, etc.) reinforcing confidence in individual members. In breaking into teams of diads, triads or simply splitting the group, each member was forced to interact with and compete against each of the other members. These activities caused various reactions much along the lines of the individual's abilities and emotional state. The more physical team games like balloon volleyball received the greatest involvement and also allowed for a more physical outlet of energy.

Group Analysis

The key characteristics of this group were twofold. One was the obvious need for belonging which resulted from the fact that, in their individual environments, each in his own way was shut off from normal peer and/or adult relationships. This need for belonging led then to the second characteristic of cohesiveness. It must be noted that initially this cohesiveness was used by the group as a defense mechanism against the assumed authoritarianism of the leaders. However, as the sincere concern and empathic understanding of the leaders was discerned by the group, the leaders were absorbed into the cohesiveness and the group efforts were directed towards problem solving. In analyzing the dynamics of the progression from individual independent functioning-to a cohesive group-to a group absorbed in problem solving, it is extremely difficult to be finitely descriptive.

The leaders established limits in which the group was required to function only to the extent that overt or physical abuse was not tolerated. If the pressure became too great for any individual, and it was not picked up by one of the members, one of the leaders would step in explaining what had been happening and help the group process the behavior. Verbal abuse directed toward the leaders, outside authoritarian figures, and at times parents, was absorbed with no recrimination. Confidentiality became an established norm which made discussion of any problem possible. The social behavior which was not acceptable at home or in the school setting, and which was in part responsible for their presence in the group, was permitted by the group leaders. As individuals in the group came to understand some of these behavioral patterns in themselves or other members,

pressures began to build to establish other norms which made these patterns unacceptable to the group and thus change began to occur. In this changing process not only were unacceptable patterns discarded but the reverse was also taking place. Patterns heretofore taken as unacceptable to the group were now brought into acceptability. Some of the norms established were those of personal purpose, receiving and giving protection and concern, giving to the group, commitment to each other, and probably most important to the teenager, to be accepted and accepting.

Problems responded to by the group involved many situations including such things as reactions to "Narcs", being hassled by the police, school class problems (whether they were subject related or a matter of personality conflict with the authoritarian figures), bad teachers, unfair parental censure, etc. These types of things were discussed openly with no fear of repercussion from self disclosure. Additionally, individuals in the group were taken to task for attempting to cover up their own shortcomings by placing the blame erroneously on one of these figures. As indicated above, this confrontation could be by any member present.

The elements of risk taking and confrontation developed in group were carried into the outside world. Without going into lengthy detail, one major example of this involved J.Z. He and his sister had to ride a school bus on which smoking pot seemed to be common. J.Z's sister reported him one day as being one of the offenders and as having pot on his person. The school authorities called him into the office, interrogated and searched him; using up most of the school day to do so. Not

wanting to cause a major battle at home J.Z. said little, but did bring up the problem in group. One of the results of this heavy therapeutic session was that J.Z. not only was given an insight to his rights, but also began to see that he really had not helped anyone involved by remaining silent. It was very shortly after this session that J.Z. was again taken to the office for a second round of interrogation. This time, J.Z. very calmly, but very forcefully, made the authorities understand that not only did he resent the treatment, but that until his mother was called, and it best be immediately, he was not about to submit to being searched. Fortunately for all, the authorities were wise enough to recognize that they had no other choice.

To illustrate confrontation in the group setting, the following examples are offered.

Leader: B.H. why do you always act as though you were crazy with the group?

B.H. What do you mean? I don't act crazy.

Leader: Why do you insist on wearing your pants legs in your boots and that crazy vest over your jacket?

J.Z. Yes, B.H., why do you wear that vest? What do all those emblems mean that you have?

B.H. (Went into a detailed explanation of the various emblems attached. Because of the bizarre grossness, the details are omitted. These explanations supposedly came from a a creed established by the "Hells Angels.")

J.Z. B.H. that's a bunch of B.S. Where do you get this stuff?

Leader: J.Z. you are correct, it is B.S., but there is something important to be observed here. B.H. felt it necessary as a means of getting group recognition to expound on these symbols. Do you realize the amount of effort, concentration and intelligence that went into that explanation and the hierarchy of symbols B.H. established? B.H. doesn't need that cover of crazyness. He is a very intelligent individual and really a nice guy.

B.H. That wasn't B.S. All of what I have said is true and next week I'll bring in books to prove it.

Leader: B.H. why was it that you came into my office an hour early and perfectly straight, There was no head band, no vest over the jacket, and the pants out of the boots. We sat and talked about psychology and you were perfectly at ease. It wasn't until you came into the group room that you switched identity to the crazy act. What made you change?

B.H. I don't know. I think this is the normal me.

One of the other members: If this is the normal you, why didn't you come in this way?

B.H. I have to ride the bus to get here and there are a lot of Jewish people on the bus. I didn't want to frighten them or offend them with the Nazi symbols and the boots.

At this point, B.H. was very much in tune with his real self and was totally sincere. Also, the group had a new insight into B.H and that which made him function. The norm being okay to be straight, had previously begun to develop. This interchange reinforced that norm quite substantially.

A second confrontation occurred at the last session attended by S.U. J.Z. had announced a week earlier that he was leaving the group even though his contract had not been fulfilled. Because the announcement was made late in the hour, only a minor group confrontation resulted. The leaders did talk to S.U. after the session and Mrs. U. was contacted regarding the withdrawal. At his mother's insistence, S.U. did show up for the session the following week.

Leader: S.U. we are glad to see you chose to return to the group to discuss the possibility of leaving.

S.U. I didn't choose to come back; my mother insisted that I come back this week. It won't change anything though cause I'm still quitting the group.

Leader: Would you at least let the group know why you want to leave?

S.U. Coming to group is a waste of my time. I haven't gotten anything out of it and I have better things to do with my time.

Leader: Yes, it seems to me you mentioned that last week. You said you could use the time getting high or playing basketball.

S.U. (Smirking) I don't play basketball.

Leader: S.R., S.U. says he isn't getting anything from the group. Do you agree and if so why do you think he isn't getting anything?

S.R. He probably isn't getting anything from the group because he doesn't give anything to the group either.

A check of the other members by the leader resulted in similar reaction from everyone except J.Z. J.Z. expressed an inaudible

nonverbal support for S.U. but when confronted could not expand on his feelings.

Leader: (Speaking to S.U.) You are displaying toward the group the same reactions we have been attempting to deal with in regard to your classes. When you don't like a class or can't or don't want to meet its requirements, you simply don't go. You have developed a pattern in your life of running from anything unpleasant. If you don't stop running now and face the problem, you may well be running the rest of your life. You can't take care of your needs, physical or emotional, that way, S.U.

S.U. I'm not running from anything. I'm not getting anything from this group and you're wrong. I take care of myself now. Nobody takes care of me. I take care of myself.

B.H That's a bunch of B.S. Who do you think takes care of your food and stuff now? Where do you get your money for the stuff you smoke and the beer you drink?

S.U. I don't mean those things. Sure, my parents have to supply that until I'm eighteen.

And so it went with S.U. Neither the leaders nor the group members could reach beyond the surface responses to needs and behavior. Perhaps those needs had been denied to the point of conscious and/or unconscious repression. In any event, S.U. was lost to the group and at least temporary to himself.

As indicated above, J.Z. announced that he was leaving the group during the same session. The leader confronted him with the fact that he had made the decision without including the group in the process.

J.Z. responded that he had not intended to bring up the fact of his leaving. A group interchange occurred at this point regarding the loss of both boys and the differences in the two situations. J.Z.'s leaving was acceptable because he had completed his contract commitment. His reluctance to include the group in his decision making was taken as an indication of the internal conflict he had gone through in arriving at the decision. He had matured considerably during the previous months and as a part of that maturity had developed an interest in the opposite sex. This interest required in addition to a new image, more income. The group had served its purpose and now he was moving on to a more satisfying life style.

New members have moved into the group replacing the ones who have left or are about to leave. S.S. has obtained a job and will be allowed to graduate from the special school he has been attending. He has regained his social skills and on graduation will be leaving the group. S.R. has been bringing up his grades and has just about met his commitment. In finding or recognizing his self worth, he has chosen to attend one of the country's finest military academies in September. B.H. has a new self image and will reach his B. average. Oddly enough, because he still needs help with his social behavior, it is highly probably that B.H. will continue with the group even though he will have met his obligation. It is interesting to note that the degree of success with these five boys was varied. However, losing only one of five, dealing with the problems the boys presented, was highly gratifying and indicates a relatively high success ratio.

A lot has been said relating to confidentiality in the group. This is not to indicate that parents were exluded from the process. The

need for parental involvement, and in fact, parenting group sessions, take a high priority in the agency. In order to meet this priority, the parents attend every sixth session in place of the boys. In these sessions, individual as well as common problems are aired. Further, there are occasions when individual parental conferences are held. The boys are aware of these exchanges and are kept informed of their content. They are also aware of the fact that the leaders are discrete, and do maintain confidentiality. If a matter of serious consequence should arise which the leader feels obligated, either legally or morally, to disclose, he must deal with it in accordance with his conscience, but privately with the boy and his parents.

The matter of termination did not come up unexpectedly leaving a lot of unresolved feelings. It had been discussed in the group and also in the parents' session. The group was aware that several members had technically fulfilled their contracts, but these members had not indicated a desire to leave. The suddenness with which S.U. quit the group caused a negative reaction because he was not by contract eligible to leave. It is of interest to note that members leave the group either as acheivers who have been successful in attaining self worth or as individuals who cannot or will not grasp the brass ring. In either case, they are so perceived and classified by the remaining group members.

In retrospect, if one criticism of the group process were to be offered, it would have to relate to the group maintenance functions. One of the most crucial of these functions is encouraging members to participate. Perhaps the loss of S.U. was the result of a lack of

concentration and motivation, or perhaps insufficient ability to make him participate more fully.

As a final note, this paper would not be complete without giving the reader a view of the session which saw S.U. and J.Z. leaving. Normally, the group is ended relatively on time depending on the interest in the activity of the session. At the close, the boys leave in one burst of energy to get out and relax after a rather intensive hour. At the close of this particular session, there was no rush for the door. The usual flip remarks and boisterous reactions were not forthcoming. The two who were leaving the group started out only to return to mingle a bit longer with the leaders. It soon became evident that the group cohesiveness was showing in all its strength. The boys each in his own way had found a sense of belonging. For these individuals the group was, in fact society in microcosm; capable of bringing out and filling the intellectual, emotional and ego needs. It is the hope of each leader that they can now move on to pick groups within society generally in which they can achieve and be successful.

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